My Soldier Keeper

By

Cuve Phillipps-Wolley

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"In the full glare of the moonlight, stood the very incarnation of cruelty."

(My Soldier Keeper.)

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CLIVE PHILLIPPS-WOLLEY

NEW YORK: 46 East 14th Street
THOMAS Y. CROWELL & CO.
BOSTON: 100 Purchase Street

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CHAPTER I.

Four o'clock of a late May morning (that is to say, four hours before most of you pale-faced lazy Londoners were out of bed) the hero of this my story was tramping into the sleeping little town of Pwl, on the Welsh border. Tramping was his trade, and his father's before him; not a bad trade either in fair weather, with enough small change in your pockets to buy a hearty meal and a big brown mug of honest "home-brewed;" a trade at any rate in which you are your own master, and may enjoy the smell of hawthorn buds and hayfields in your nostrils and the song of blackbird and linnet in your ears, instead of choking yourself with the smoke of the "Underground," or having all the music knocked out of you by the harsh cries and strident noises of a vast manufacturing town. A better life, my masters, than the clerk's on his high stool, or the lawyer's amongst his musty parchments, were it not that life is not all youth nor the year all summer. It is well enough when the blood is warmer than May sunshine, but unfortunately human beings grow old, and in time require a place to creep home to and take their rest in when the back is bent and the shadows fall, while

the wind blows keen from the east. And this is what the tramp seldom finds, unless it be within the walls of that hard-featured red-brick house upon the hill, which, in spite of its charity, nobody ever yet has been known to love.

But who talks or recks of winter or old age, of friendlessness and poverty, in the May-tide of his sixteenth year? Not my hero certainly, that brown-faced resolute lad stepping out briskly beside his father's donkey-cart, his head well up as he whistles "Only a pansy blossom." "Only a pansy blossom" is one of the favorite airs of the band of the gallant —4th, a militia regiment now assembling for its annual training in Pwl. If there is a doubt or a sorrow in the boy's mind it is connected with a certain half-inch, a terrible half-inch which may separate him from many good things for another year. To be admitted into the regiment to which his father belongs the boy knows that even as a "growing lad" he should stand at least five feet three inches, and he is grievously afraid that even in the early morning when his backbone is at its longest, and all the sustaining muscles fresh and strong, he will never be able to coax the sergeant into the belief that he is more than five feet two and a half inches.

Broad of chest he undoubtedly is, sound too of wind and limb, keen-eyed as a sparrow-hawk, likely to make such a soldier as you may hope to take from the plough but never from the slum; but is he five feet three inches? That, at 4 A.M. in May, in the year of grace 185–, was the trouble of Joe Brown, cheap-jack and hawker, or, as the people on the road called him in recognition of his coaxing ways when selling his father's wares, "Young Sugar."

The father (at that moment asleep in the donkey-cart) was a gray-haired man, still comparatively young, but worn and weather-beaten, who being a rolling stone had left the plough for the road, and had, I grieve to record it, early acquired from a just and discerning public the sobriquet of "Moist Sugar." Well, it is no doubt dry and dusty work tramping along those Welsh roads when once the sun is up and has dried the dew, and public-houses are as frequent as blackberries by the wayside — public-houses in whose dishonest ales there is so much salt that even in drowning your thirst they insure its speedy resurrection.

The Sugars, father and son (there were no ladies in the firm), were going up for the annual training of the local regiment; the boy, as he hoped, for his first, the father for his seventh or eighth turn of service. To the old man his month's drill amongst his old companions was the best and merriest month in the year, a month during which enforced sobriety, good feeding, regular hours and regular exercise, restored to him some of that health and self-respect which he had squandered so lavishly during the other eleven months of the year.

In all this England of ours, in this wonderful nineteenth century, there is nothing more marvellous than the miracles performed by the adjutants and color-sergeants of our various militia battalions between the first day of the training and the seventh.

On the day of which I am writing, along all the dusty roads which lead to Pwl, by ones and twos and in little groups, tattered unshaven men, with long hair unkempt and bent shoulders, were shuffling into town.

Miners out of work, tramps, ne'er-do-weels of all sorts, even a sailor who had managed to find room for his training between his voyages in merchant ships to America or the Indies; men of all sorts and conditions in life, but draggled and out at elbows, were making for the barrack square of the —4th and the daily ration of good militia beef.

The strong air of the May morning, laden with scent of hawthorn and apple blossom, and fresh with just a touch of frost, was not strong enough to make them hold their heads up like men, and yet in three days' time, at most in seven, you shall see them clean, close-cropped, and smart, their heads up, eyes clear, and step quick and steady, soldiers proud of themselves and their regiment, and beggars no longer.

This is the drill-sergeant's miracle, and its effects will last perhaps a fortnight beyond the training.

. . . . .

Weeks have gone by now since the tramps made their way into Pwl. Lift your eyes, reader, from the little red town, through which the canal winds slowly, a canal along which the bustling fly-boats ply no longer, a canal as sleepy as the little town itself; lift your eyes, I say, to the hill above, where close against his lordship's deer park the white lines of the camp are pitched.

The preliminary drill is over; the recruits have at last been taught the goose-step, and by a process of mental arithmetic can generally tell their right hands from their left.

The whole regiment is out. June in its most gracious mood is upon us. Even at ten o'clock the shadows are deep and warm, and all over the park the horse-chestnuts are great cones of green leaf and

white blossom. There is a hum and stir of life all over the camp, and some six hundred men or more seem ready and waiting for a call. The call comes. The bugle breaks the stillness; the men are massed upon the parade-ground. "Officers, officers, come and be slanged," says the bugle, and a group of young fellows, struggling with tight white gloves or intrusive swords, which *will* get between their legs, hurry through the trees to join their men. The men are called to attention, and then the daily inspection commences.

The tramps and tatterdemalions of the road are going to satisfy their officers that not a boot-lace is untied, not a chin unshaven, not a spot on belt or facings; and as a rule they succeed.

"Examine arms!" is the command, and the muzzles of the rifles of F company come down from the "port" with the precision of clockwork.

Along the ranks go officer and sergeant peering curiously down each barrel and passing one after another until the middle of the front rank is reached, then the subaltern pauses with an air of disappointment before a brown-faced, eager-looking lad.

"Well, Brown, I thought you meant to make a soldier. Twice in two days I've spoken to you about your rifle being dirty. Sergeant Chalks, take this man's name."

For a moment the boy seems about to say something, but his rear-rank man gives him a sly kick; his lips are compressed, the sergeant salutes and takes his name, "Joe Brown, 47," and the inspection proceeds. All through that parade our young friend Joe Brown is very much at sea, goes to the right whenever he should go to the left, and invariably moves

at the "slope" when every one else is at the "shoulder." By 11:30 he has attracted about as much of the sergeant's attention as is good for any active recruit, and quite enough at any rate to keep him out of mischief for the next two or three days. After the men were dismissed the boy made his way to his tent, and as he threw down his rifle with unsoldierly violence, he was greeted with a storm of chaff from the nine men with whom he was billeted.

"Well, Sugar, my lad, don't you know your left hand from your right?" said a stout bloated-looking fellow of thirty, the identical rear-rank man who had stopped the lad's answer to his officer's reprimand with that sly kick before mentioned.

"Yes, Mouse, I do right well; that's my left, you bet," planting it clean between the Mouse's eyes. "And that was your rifle that wasn't cleaned this morning, and the second time you've taken mine *by mistake.*"

The hot blood flamed up in the boy's brown face, and he looked all over like fighting, but a laugh rose among the men who stood round at what they deemed the youngster's audacity, for of all the men in the battalion the stout little scamp now pulling himself together after Joe's unlooked-for onslaught was undoubtedly master when it came to fisticuffs.

There and then he would probably have demolished the aggressor but for the interference of the onlookers, who tried to make the boy ask pardon of the "Mouse." But Sugar would "see him hanged first," so that after Tattoo had sounded and the lights should have been out, and the camp at peace, a group of men in their shirt-sleeves assembled behind the lines of F company to see young "Sugar" take his thrashing. The Mouse

was an old hand at such encounters, and confident. The boy's blood was up; he had done battle on the road many a time before, and was as hard and game as a fighting cock.

At first the Mouse (to his credit be it said) "played light," tapped the boy facetiously on the nose, ducked his head and brought that hard sandy object confidingly within an inch or two of the face of his angry young enemy. The men, his companions, appreciating his science, as in spite of grandmotherly laws Englishmen always will, applauded the "Mouse" to the echo. But one man, in whom you might possibly have recognized, changed though he was since we last met him, Sugar the elder, seemed still to think seriously of the boy's chances.

"Stick to him, Joe," he kept saying, "wind must tell in the end; and don't you make such a row, you fellows, or you'll have the sergeant here before the boy gets a chance."

Gradually the "Mouse" awoke to the fact that light play and fluster alone would never stop this growing lad of sixteen; and more than that, though a blow seldom reached his own well-guarded head, yet when it did it "left its mark." For his reputation's sake he must finish off the boy at once. Twice, three times the heavy left hand came home, cruelly cutting the brown face every time; but there was English mettle in the boy, the same mettle that took our men to die at the guns in that Crimean valley of death, and that has written the names of so many glorious victories on our colors in the blood of the men who won them.

Every time the "Mouse" attacked the boy's eyes were turned full to meet him, though the head moved

ever so little to avoid the full force of the blow, and both the boy's hands (left free from the duties of defence) went out straight and hard to give blow for blow. At last one of them caught the Mouse off his balance, and down he came with a crash, the back of his head hitting hard against a tent-peg as he fell, a blow which more than half stunned him. When at last he was put on his feet again his head was hanging and his hands and eyes seemed dazed, and the whole man was an easy prey for the boy.

"Bravo, Joe! go at him, lad — finish the beggar off — now's your chance, my lad."

The boy's eyes glittered, and he came towards his man, all the bad blood in him roused by severe punishment, and bitter with the undeserved reproaches of the morning parade, but his father's voice stopped him.

"Steady, Joe, my lad," cried the old tramp, "steady! I did na teach yo that. Hit them as hard as yo like when their heads are up and they can see thee, mon, but give 'em all fair play. Wait a while till he knows where he bin."

"Wait a while?" cried a voice from the crowd; "what are you a-talking of, Sugar? the boy has knocked 'un out fair enough, why shouldn't he go in and finish 'un off?"

"Because we dunna fight that a way in Powysland, mate, and I'd rather my lad took a hammering than gave one to a man who was hafe silly," replied old Sugar, holding on to his lad's arm.

"Well, you are an old fool, it's robbing the boy of his only chance."

And there is no doubt it was, for as soon as the "Mouse" had collected his scattered wits, he set about his work in such an excessively business-like

way, that young muscle and pluck were altogether out of the running, and it became very evident that the boy must give in before superior strength and skill. At this juncture, however, a voice that can be heard from the parade-ground to all the hill-tops round rang out from somewhere very near to the scene of the encounter — "Now then there, what's all this noise? Who is that man outside his tent?" At the particular moment under consideration there happened to be at the lowest computation a company and a half outside their tents within some twenty yards of the spot on which (to be honest) the sergeant-major had been standing, smoking his pipe and watching the combat, for the last ten minutes. Now he thought it time to interfere, and as his last words died away there really was only the retreating heel of one ammunition boot to be seen outside the tents in the lines of F company. Silence settled down on the camp; an old hare who had been sitting up in the moonlight beyond the park fence relapsed from his attitude of attention and shuffled quietly off into the shadow; the sergeant-major moved on, grumbling as long as he thought the men could hear him, and then with a grin on his face sought such short slumbers as it is to be presumed are allowed even to the vigilant eyes of a sergeant-major.

On parade next morning Joe Brown's rifle was as clean as his neighbor's, and for the rest of that training no further strictures were passed upon it, a change which may be accounted for by the fact that the rifle the boy carried was always now number 694, and not 694 or 695 according to the convenience of the slovenly rear-rank "Mouse."

On early morning parade neither the Mouse nor his adversary looked straight to their front, in the manner recommended by drill books, during the ordeal of inspection, but beyond a passing comment on the blackness of what he was pleased to call their "facings," the subaltern on duty took no notice of their battered visages. Possibly he and the sergeant-major had already taken counsel together.

. . . . .

And now the last day of the training drew near; the last day of a week which would have astonished Noah even after his experiences in the ark. The sun had done what he considered his duty during the first three weeks of the training, in burning the skin off all the faces in camp and teaching every one what a valuable companion he was under canvas.

This last week was wet, distinctly wet, even for Wales! Day after day for four and twenty hours at a time the steady pouring rain had been soaking the canvas, knocking the blossoms off the chestnuts, and converting the parade-ground into a quagmire. The tents were natural shower-baths, their trenches, in spite of constant work, were chokeful of water. It was all very well for the officers, though they did not like it, and cast many longing glances at the comfortable hotel in the village below; but for the men (ten in a tent) it was a serious matter, and many of them were beginning to fall sick, some for the sake of the extra comfort to be obtained in the hospital, and others because unfortunately they could not help it. Those who belonged to the first class met with a cheery reception from the regimental doctor, and after drinking his health once in what he was pleased to call "a little draught" (about half a pint of all the filth in

the pharmacopœia) returned contentedly to their quarters.

But there were many whose ailments were real, and among the number poor old Sugar. He had got too moist at last even for him, and as usual out of pure good nature. In a bell tent there are two positions in wet weather to be religiously avoided, the two nearest the entrance. Nothing will persuade the rain to keep out or the men to close the flies when they go out and leave the tent during a storm. The inevitable result is that some one has to sleep on what is practically a soaking truss of straw, and in tent No. 3 of F company that some one, from choice, was old Sugar. From choice, I say, for (being the youngest in the tent) Sugar's boy had been told off to this undesirable couch, but the old man relying on the hardening influence of some twenty years on the road had given up his drier lair to the boy and taken the place by the door for himself. Alas, he had done more than harden his frame in those twenty years of wandering, and every drunken bout and every self-neglect was telling now against the man who lay tossing in one of the white-washed rooms of the hospital, in delirium brought on by acute inflammation of the lungs.

The poor fellow was a favorite with the officers for his smart bearing and witty tongue (though it is but fair to them to say that it would have made no difference had he not been), and ice from the castle and fruit from far and near, all the luxuries of which he knew so little in life, were round his bed at the finish. But all was in vain, and the brown-faced lad, who leaned wistfully over the little bed, knew only too surely that his only relation, his protector and companion for as long past as he could remember

anything, would accompany and protect him no longer.

The poor fellow was raving now of the last few weeks of his life, and that which seemed to recur most often to his mind was his boy's fight.

Suddenly sitting bolt-upright in bed, grasping the clothes with both hands, and looking for a moment as if he recognized the lad, he shouted, —

"That's right, lad, hit him hard, hit out straight; but give 'em fair play, lad, allus give 'em fair play."

They were old Sugar's last words, and as he dropped back into his bed his spirit left him, and went to One who judges all men according to their lights and according to their chances.

Fatherless, homeless, and friendless, the boy sought the best friends and the best home such as he can find; passed from the county militia to the ranks of a Welsh regiment, and found there for a while home and friends and duty.

CHAPTER II.

"Well, old fellow, this is all skittles, and I am going to give it up. That confounded fellow has driven every head of game out of the country. I'll be hanged if I think there is a pheasant or a kakur within half a dozen miles of our camp," and the speaker threw himself on the ground in front of his tent with every appearance of weariness and disgust.

Even out of temper, as he then was, this hard-bitten, sunburnt fellow was a good-looking specimen of an Anglo-Indian, and the spot on which our camp stood

was as pretty a spot as there is in the hill country of India, and that is saying a great deal.

He and I, brother officers and old friends, were enjoying the one pleasure which makes India tolerable to Englishmen, a really good innings at the big game in the hills. At least this is what we had been doing until about a week ago, when an evil spirit prompted us to move on to the camping-ground to which I now introduce my reader. A grassy slope on the hillside above the main body of the timber afforded ample room for our tent and for the rough shelter which sufficed for our men. Above us towered a gigantic forest-tree, the advance guard of those thousands of its fellows which rolled down wave upon wave to the brink of the mountain streams meandering through the valleys far below us. Far above us rose the sharp edges of the snow-peaks, looking extraordinarily close and distinct in the clear evening sky. As for the plains, with their sweltering heat and everlasting drills, they were, thank Heaven, far below us; so far away, indeed, that we almost forgot we had ever been broiled by the sun of India, as we spread our hands to the cheery blaze of our camp-fire. Up in the hills sharp cold nights follow days not too hot for hard exercise.

"You're a bit too impatient, Hardwick, but I grant you game is very scarce up here, and I cannot understand it, unless our men are right in saying that the white shekarry they talk of has shot the place out."

"Right or wrong I am off to-morrow, so give me a light for my pipe, and make up your mind to come with me."

"No; I mean to finish my leave here, and if I can't find game I'll amuse myself with looking for this

mysterious hunter," I replied; and then, as the stars came out, we lay down for a long luxurious smoke before turning in for the night.

Next morning we broke up camp. Hardwick took half the men and turned his head homewards, while I with the other half set my face towards a mountain ridge still farther in the forest.

I had resisted all my friend's persuasion, not from a belief in better sport in store, but simply because I preferred the hills, even without sport, to the plains. Like Hardwick, I was nearly convinced that we were in the neighborhood of that invisible Nimrod who had sent back so many parties to cantonments empty-handed, and loud in their imprecations on the head of one who, in the pursuit of filthy lucre, denuded whole districts of game, fur, and feather.

The Himalayan pheasant and the little musk deer were the principal objects of his pursuit, and he rarely, if ever, shot, preferring to trap them in openings left in cunningly built artificial hedges with which he barricaded the game tracks in the hills. Intensely as we hated this man, for the sake of the sport he destroyed, he would have been safe among us at any rate; but there was many an Indian shekarry who would rather have put a bullet into his hide than into that of the biggest tiger that ever walked the jungle. The beast only robbed him of a head of cattle now and again, but the man spoiled his business, and robbed him of many a rupee earned by a good day's sport shown to the white sahibs.

On the morrow of Hardwick's departure I was cleaning my rifle in front of my tent, and gazing idly at the mountain slope opposite my camp, when a moving object attracted my attention. Slowly it

came from the shadow of the timber and shuffled across the open, stopping now and then to feed on the way. It was a bear, and a good-sized one too; still I doubt whether under ordinary circumstances I should have felt inclined late in the day to try a long stalk for so unsporting a beast as an Indian black bear. But for days I had not seen a head of game of any sort, and this scarcity of things to shoot at lent, I suppose, even poor Bhaloo, a fictitious value in my eyes. At any rate I was soon creeping towards him, and in about half an hour's time was crouching, very much out of breath, within seventy yards of the mango-tree from which the unsuspecting brute was tearing his evening meal of fruit, doing apparently as much damage as possible to the tree meanwhile. Bhaloo (the Indian name for the bear) is a most unthrifty gardener, breaking down whole trees to get a mouthful of berries or nuts. For a few minutes I lay concealed, watching my prey and trying to recover some of that wind and steadiness which I had lost in my crawl up the hill. Then I covered the beast's shoulder and fired. In an instant he was rolled up like a hedgehog, and was crashing head over heels through the brush downhill at a terrific pace.

"Dead for a ducat," I muttered, and rising from my ambush followed more deliberately in the way he had gone. But I was wrong. At the bottom of the slope there was no bear, and though I hunted well and carefully I could find no trace of him dead or alive. By the time I had quite made up my mind that further search was useless darkness had drawn very near. The outlines of hill and tree had grown unfamiliar, and before long I realized that I had lost my way back to camp. As a rule my bump of

locality serves me very well, so well indeed that in a spirit of overweening confidence I had told my men never to fire signal shots for me in case I seemed to them late in returning, lest they should by so doing disturb game in our neighborhood.

On this night I bitterly regretted this order, and was looking forward to a lonely camp without food, drink, or blankets, when to my delight I caught the sudden gleam of a fire through the trees in front of me.

That it was a camp-fire there could be no doubt, but whose was it? Not mine certainly, for mine was on the top of the ridge, this was away in the valley. In another minute I had pushed quietly through the dense timber, and all was explained. Under a big overhanging bowlder sat a man, his back half-turned towards me, his whole attention taken up with a moonal pheasant, which he appeared to be carefully skinning. At last then I had found the white shekarry at home, alone in his own camp, busy preparing one of those beautiful specimens which have since found their way through India to so many of the principal museums of Europe.

As I peered eagerly through the bushes a dry twig broke beneath my feet. Quick as thought the moonal pheasant dropped from the nervous hands I had been watching, and with a spring like a tiger cat's the man caught up his rifle and faced me. Then it flashed across me that there might be some danger in stalking this strange hermit of the backwoods. However, I was in for it now, so ostentatiously leaning my rifle against the nearest tree, I advanced with outstretched hand and unarmed into the open. Without taking my hand the shekarry laid aside his rifle and motioned

me to a seat beside his fire. Seen in the uncertain light of his wood fire, I could at first see no reason for his native name, "the *white* shekarry." Bronzed he was to a tawny copper-color, and bearded almost to his waist. If this man had ever been white it must have been long, long ago. For all that, when he spoke at last, it was not in Hindoostanee, but in good English, a little hesitatingly at first, as if he was unpractised in the tongue, but still with an accent which none but a native Briton could possess; and as I looked at him, in spite of the great beard and the wild garb he wore, I saw through the firelight something in the heavily built, broad-shouldered frame of the man and in his solid square head, which stamped him English more surely than the hall-mark stamps pure silver.

At first shyness (almost fear) and annoyance at being caught seemed to struggle in my host's face with a half-glad expression of welcome.

But the pipe is a wonderful peacemaker. Between the whiffs of mine I told my story. How I had lost first my game and then my way; how I had accidentally stumbled upon his camp; and how that, unless he took me in as his guest, I should be obliged to camp out supperless and alone in the jungle.

Whilst I was talking he had filled an ancient brier from my pouch, and now the good mellow cavendish was doing its duty, thawing my host's grim reserve and dispelling his distrust. Soon he was laughing over my surprise at Bhaloo's disappearance. That he said was easily accounted for; I had missed the bear clean, but the bullet had gone close enough to make him in a hurry to be gone. In such cases he had often seen bears trust rather to the chances of a headlong

roll than to their own somewhat slow-going feet. From the bear we wandered on to other kindred topics. I told him of our recent want of sport, of my companion's disgust and return to cantonment, and by the time the shekarry rose to put the last log on the camp-fire before turning in we had become good friends.

Next day he offered to show me my way back to camp, or if I preferred to send my men home and trust myself to him to lead me to better shooting-grounds. As you may imagine it did not take me long to decide. There might be a little risk in the adventure, but there was a rare good chance of seeing such sport as no one else in India could show me. So the men were paid and dismissed, and for a fortnight the shekarry and I shot and camped together. And rare sport we had, and right well my new friend proved his assertion that none of the stories about the decay of sport in India are well founded, but that if you will deviate but a little from the beaten track, abandon some of those luxuries with which most men handicap themselves in the chase, and work as a hunter should work, you will still find no lack of big game to reward your efforts.

But we did not shoot every day. Like some great landowner at home he would sometimes take me round to look at what he called his preserves. These were little ranges of hills, amongst which his men were camped, employed in the systematic pursuit of musk deer and pheasants.

Seeing how many natives he employed, I got some idea of the ease with which he obtained information of any white man's advent on his hunting-grounds in time to avoid him if he so chose.

It was at one of these hill camps, by a fire apart from the great blaze round which his men sat, that about a week after I first met him he told me his story, a story so quaint that I have tried to put it down in his own words, and only regret that as you read the tale you cannot see (as I do in memory) the wild scenes amongst which it was told. Picture to yourself that forest scene: a wood fire with this brawny sportsman and myself smoking over it; a skin or two pegged out on the ground; a dozen lithe, active natives chattering under an awning of twined boughs at some little distance from our fire; a bright starlit sky above; and around the thousand mysterious voices of the forest at night. And this between the puffs of his pipe is what he told me: —

"It is so long ago that even if you broke your word and carried news of me and my story to the next station, I don't think the military authorities would take the trouble to hunt me up; and if they did I am not easy to find, as you sporting officers can bear witness.

"After you leave this camp I, like enough, shall never see another man who has worn the Queen's uniform all my life. And I don't want to, they were hard days for me when I wore it."

So then, I thought, my friend, you are a deserter. Tommy Atkins much sunburned and in disgrace, but the familiar Tommy Atkins still.

"How I got into the service first I don't rightly remember now. I think I must have been under age, but I got them to take me somehow; I was a big lad, and with a little stretching came up to the required height, and was a bit bigger than I need have been round the chest. My father used to go out with one

of the Welsh militia regiments for a month when we were on tramp, just to get set straight in health like by a month's compulsory sobriety and good feeding; and this, I think, must have put the idea into my head.

"It's wonderful what the sergeant can do for a recruit, what with cutting his hair, making him shave himself, wash, and wear a decent coat. Why, in a day a good sergeant will turn a tramp into a soldier, ay, and would turn me out fit for your company, sir, on parade in an hour. But you know all this, sir. Perhaps you don't know that all sergeants aren't good sergeants. There's some as does their work for the love of it, and some as does it when the officers are looking, and slips it into the lads like winking when the officer finds fault because something has not been done which the sergeant forgot to warn us to do. Of course we say nothing. You know we mustn't answer in the ranks, and we don't often. But I did once or twice, and got it hot and heavy for my folly. It wasn't long before Barlow, our sergeant, had me on his black books, and if ever anything went wrong, 'Brown,' that was me, was the first to be suspected. I don't think I was worse than the rest, but you mustn't always be looking a chap up, or he's bound to be doing something a little irregular sometimes. I did it a bit too often, and when I was sent out to India the officers had got to look on me as a kind of a black sheep. There was one thing I'm bound to say, though, the officers never treated me any worse than any one else, and often and often one or other of them would give me a good talking to, and say, 'Now, Brown, you're a smart young fellow, take a pull and go straight.' At last I got rid of Barlow,

and for two years in India I loved my regiment, earned my stripes, and there wasn't a lance-corporal in Her Majesty's service prouder of himself and his regiment than I was. We'll drink Her Majesty's health, sir, in tea, if you don't mind; there's nothing stronger here, and she never did me no harm, God bless her."

Here my friend paused for wind, drank the proposed health, refilled his pipe from my pouch, and proceeded, —

"Unfortunately for me, at the end of two years Barlow joined the battalion out here, and then my troubles began again. In a month I had lost my stripes and my character. Easy things to get rid of if you are steady and straight; easier things to lose if you have an enemy in power and a hot temper. But it wasn't only me who suffered from Barlow's domineering ways, the whole of B company hated him. He was a smart man, too, on parade, but a sly, loose fish once he was out of sight of the officers; and the way he used to swear at us for the least thing was enough to make your hair stand on end. But he had got a good-conduct medal, and who'd have thought of his going wrong except us who knew him?

"Amongst the men who came out with him were one or two regular jail birds, who hated him worse than I did, and these fellows before long began saying that something must be done with that Barlow, this sort of thing could not go on any longer. At last one day on parade, the sun was grilling us all, as it only can on the plains of India, and we had been standing waiting for the inspecting officer a trifle longer than is safe for men subject to sunstroke. When he did come the ranks were opened. Barlow was our color-

sergeant, and was moving along behind the rear rank, when the officer called out to some one to dress the rear rank of the B company.

"Fry, one of the jail birds I spoke of, had been drinking a bit the night before, and that and the sun had made him faint and giddy, and he was leaning about anyhow and spoiling the look of the line. Barlow was on to him in a minute, and shook him up smartly. For a moment Fry kept his place, and the next his muscles gave, and he was back out of line again. 'You ——,' muttered Barlow with an oath, 'stand up, will you!' and lifting his heavy foot, he actually in his passion kicked the man into his place. Had one of the officers seen him I suppose Barlow would have suffered for his loss of temper, as he deserved; as it was, a look that Cain might have envied passed over Fry's face, and perfectly sobered by rage, the man stood up, and the sergeant passed on.

"That night a lot of us talked things over in quarters. Fry was Irish, and had an Irishman's gift of the gab. We all had made up our minds to do for Barlow; but how were we to do it? No one dared report him, for though we were believed and Barlow punished, we should be marked men for the rest of our lives in the regiment. The evening wore on, and we had all had too much to drink, when some one suggested that 'shooting was what Barlow deserved.' I don't believe the words were meant, but Fry snatched at them at once, and before most of us had realized what the awful proposal was, the question had become not what was to be done, but WHO was to do it. The word coward has a wonderful effect on men, and it was that name that we all feared to draw

upon ourselves by backing out when this black deed was proposed.

"There were cards on the table; and the same evil spirit which had proposed every other step in the affair now suggested that we should cut the cards to decide who was to shoot Barlow. We agreed in silence. Some men were bitter enough, or drunk enough, to believe for the moment that they wished Barlow's death, others afraid to draw back. 'Here, Brown, you ought to bring Barlow good luck, he has been down on you often enough. Shuffle the cards, my lad.' It was Fry who spoke, and mechanically I collected the dirty cards, splashed all over with liquor. 'What is it to be?' asked a shaky voice in the crowd. 'The ace of diamonds. Whoever draws the ace of diamonds shoots Barlow, and if he doesn't, we each and all of us swear to shoot him. Is that agreed?' cried Fry, his evil eyes gleaming and his short hair standing up like the bristles on an angry terrier's back. 'Agreed, agreed,' passed from man to man, and an ugly look of determination settled on all the faces round the table, a look that comes natural to an Englishman in a corner.

"'Now, my lad, give every one fair play,' said Fry to me. 'Shuffle 'em up.'

"'Give every one fair play.' Well, he was not a very good chap, my poor old father. He drank more than was good for him, and a lot more than he could pay for; but in a stand-up fight he was a thorough good plucked one, and that was just what he always used to tell me. 'Joe, lad,' he used to say, 'stand up to 'em, hit 'em as hard as you jolly well can, but give 'em all fair play, even if you *get* a licking instead of giving one.'

"The ring is gone out now, I hear, and a good thing too perhaps, for I never saw any fun in watching two other fellows hammering each other; but it's a good game to play at yourself, and that bit of its rules about fair play makes up for a good deal, and any way saved me.

"Face to face, both armed and my blood up, I would have shot Barlow then and been glad to do it, but it wasn't in my father's son to shoot him in the back; and yet what was I to do? If one of my companions drew the fatal ace, how could I save Barlow? Warn the sergeant, and betray a friend who was probably himself only a half-willing actor in the matter? That would be a shabby act and would do little good, for Barlow would probably grow more unbearable, my comrade would be sacrificed, and I could not stay in the regiment. Stay in the regiment! No! I certainly could not if I peached. But then did I want to? Was not my life unbearable to me, and did there seem any chance of change except for the worse? It could not be long with such daily aggravation before my hot temper flamed up and brought down on my head dismissal and disgrace, if nothing worse. Why not have done with it now rather than later on?

"The thoughts rushed through my half-drunken head so rapidly as to make me dizzy, but, right or wrong, I thought I saw my way to give Barlow such a warning as might save the company from further persecution, and save Barlow from the death he almost deserved. The cost to me would be heavy; it might be desertion, I was not sure it might not be death, but I was in a strange reckless mood that night, caring not one jot for life, and yet anxious to

do this one good deed (if it was one) rather from pride, perhaps, than from any better motive.

"When the men had a 'sing-song' under the trees once a fortnight I used always to be the conjurer of the party and make cards and coppers appear and disappear at my bidding. This training stood me in good stead on the night I am telling you about. First, I shuffled the cards, secured the ace, and then threw the pack on the table. One by one the men drew near, cut nervously, and turned away with a sigh of relief as they turned up some innocent club or spade. I let them all cut once, but at the second round turned up the ace for myself. For a moment there was a dead silence, and through the smoke of the room I could almost see my dead father's face with a smile on it for me, and almost hear his voice in the general hush. Fry's jeering tones brought me back to myself. 'Now then,' I heard him say, 'who'll tell me that that ain't Providence? If there's one man more than another who had ought to shoot Barlow, Brown's the man, and he'll do it too when he thinks of his stripes and his character that's gone.'

"I don't remember how that evening ended, but I know that when I woke next morning I thought that I had had a bad dream, but knew better when I saw by the head of my bed the soiled beery ace of diamonds. Right well I knew who had put it there, and if wishes could kill I should have been guilty that morning of the murder not of Barlow, but of Fry. There was no hurry, some one said last night. Sentence had been passed upon Barlow and his executioner appointed; but the time and place of his death were left to me. If I could carry out the sentence of my fellows and escape, so much the better for me, but

there must be no flinching. Once or twice I thought of going to the officers and making a clean breast of the whole plot, but that would have involved the betrayal of so many of my comrades, and I could not sneak; besides, it would not work in the long-run. Then I thought of talking the fellows over, but whenever that thought came into my head Fry's evil face came before me with its close-set eyes and red hair, and I knew that the devil which possessed him had mastered half the men in our company, so that any attempt of this kind would only ruin me, brand me as a coward, and rob Barlow of his one chance of life. That was, oddly enough, my chief motive then, to save Barlow. I had backed myself to do this thing, against the devil that tempted me, against the revenge which prompted my ready hand to kill, against my love of life itself, and I swore to myself over and over again that I would win.

"I hardly knew how to pray, but I used to keep thinking that if there was a God he ought to help me in my struggle, and I wanted him to pretty badly. We learned since that that kind of wanting is pretty much like *real* praying, and when you've lived by yourself in these mountains in the song and sunshine of the day and the dead stillness of the lonely nights, you soon get pretty certain whether there is a God or not. But that is not what I want to tell you about. After two days I could not stand the life any longer. It was partly my fancy no doubt, but I could rest neither sleeping nor waking for the thought that every one's eyes were on me, the murderer elect, all asking the same question, 'When is he going to do it?'

"'B company will parade to-morrow morning for

class firing, and don't let me find your arms as filthy as usual, Brown,' said Barlow on the evening of the second day, reading out the orders for the morrow.

"You mustn't answer from the ranks; but the blood rushed to my face until I felt dizzy and blind. Why could the man not let me alone? My rifle foul! Did not young Mr. Baldwin, our great shekarry, swear there was no man fit to touch a sporting rifle but me, his companion in many a jungle wandering? My rifle dirty, when Barlow knew I was the shot of the regiment, and what good shot ever neglected his tools? Why should I not shoot the man? Had he not amply deserved it? Day by day he was turning all my life to bitterness, souring my nature, and making me a reproach and a by-word amongst my fellows. Shoot him! and lose my wager with myself —my match against the devil? scarcely!

"But Barlow's words settled my plans, and that night I made my final preparations.

"Mr. B. and myself were to have passed a night in that week on a platform in one of the forest trees, watching for a tiger who had killed his prey near the tree's foot. He and I had often watched in the dark and until dawn together before; but this was to have been an exciting night, a night when the prey we watched for was a murdering man-eater, whose victim was no ordinary 'kill,' no goat or cow, but a poor devil of a native postman who lay stiff and mangled in the bush below us.

"I was intrusted with the making of the machân, and went out with some natives for that purpose, carrying with me an old sporting rifle my master had given me and some cartridges. Here is the rifle still, with the engraved silver plate upon its but, bearing

Mr. Baldwin's crest and initials. He used to say the rifle carried high. Well it may do. I have got used to it now, and it shoots well enough for me." Here the man passed his hand lovingly over the weapon, which long use had made almost a part of himself.

"Beyond the rifle and what few rupees I could lay my hands on (and I had not many, be sure) I took nothing, so that it was not hard to secrete my little bundle whilst the men were preparing the machân, and easy too to leave my rifle behind by accident when my master and I left the machân next morning. I don't think Mr. B. knew whether I had a rifle with me or not, he was too intent upon the business in hand, and had no thought for anything but the silent beast which every moment he expected to see emerge in the moonlight. But though the bushes rustled mysteriously and the forest was full of strange low voices, the great cat never came to his foul banquet, and we had to go back to our quarters without getting a shot.

. . . . . .

"The morning was still young and the withering sun was not yet up on the day fixed for class firing when we marched down to our range, a dry and scorched-up plain, hard as asphalt, and with about as much vegetation upon it as you'll find in Fleet Street.

"Barlow was with us at the firing point and young Mr. Baldwin in the buts.

"As for me I was like a man in a trance. Fry's eye followed me like the eye of a mesmerist. I believe he read every thought in my heart. The whole company seemed to be (and was) watching me intently, as men watch an actor on the stage.

"We all shot infamously that morning. Men who generally put on bull's-eye after bull's-eye, and never scored less than an average of centres, now knocked the dust up right and left, or dropped their bullets almost at their feet. My own head was hot, my tongue dry, my knees and elbows knocking together like castanets. At last up went the red flag, and with a bitter sneer at our shooting Barlow rose and walked up the range to superintend the washing out of the hits and make up the register.

"Quick as light I stepped forward, snatched up my rifle, put it to my shoulder, and fired over Barlow at the dummy target.

"At that moment a sudden coolness possessed me and I felt that my bullet would go true; more than that I heard the shot strike the wood, and should have laid long odds that though the sergeant must have heard the warning shriek of the bullet in his ear, I had scored a rare good 'bull' upon the 'dummy.'

"But alone against the devil man cannot prevail. As I fired Barlow's arms went up into the air, and the next moment he lay stone dead upon the yellow plain, a little purple stream oozing through his strong white teeth, and his glazing eyes gazing unblinking at the scorching sun.

"At that moment I must have been nearly mad. It seemed to me that I was cold as ice, and yet the sun was burning into my brain; that I was standing there for minutes with my smoking rifle in my hand and my victim at my feet, and yet no man laid hands on me; that the report of my rifle was ringing yet through the woods, among the hills, up to heaven, and loudly, mockingly, down in hell, and yet all else

was dead stillness. No one spoke and *it* lay very still!"

. . . . . .

Here the shekarry paused, his thin face drawn and haggard, gazing dumbly into the dying embers.

"It must all have been my fancy, for had I stood there dreaming I should not have been here now. I remember how I turned and fled, my feet winged with fear, not at the stern justice behind, which demanded my life for his, not at the hissing bullets which flicked up the sand and pattered at my feet, but of that dead thing with the blood upon its stiffening lips.

"I was always the fastest runner of the regiment, and when I reached the edge of the nullah which bounded one side of the plain on which we had our range, no one was within one hundred and fifty yards of me. In the rains this nullah was the bed of a foaming torrent, now it was choked with all manner of green things, rank and high and luxuriant: though only some fifty yards across its recesses were almost inaccessible sanctuaries. Its rocky walls were perpendicular, and from them grew trees and bushes; trees and bushes too, in a dense mass of fresh foliage, rose from the bottom of the nullah, where a few straggling pools still gave them life, and tempted all the beasts of the forest to dwell amongst them. Reckless of life I sprang blindly down the bank, crashing through the branches of a tree which saved my fall, until half stunned and breathless I lay hidden deep down at the bottom of the ravine beneath the rank weeds and grasses. For a moment I lay there sobbing for breath, and then, like a stricken beast, I crawled farther and farther down the dell.

How I cursed the birds who chattered and flitted from bush to bush as I moved, and the deer I stirred, whose short bark told my enemies where I had moved him.

"But search, I suppose, seemed hopeless, and as the sun rose higher and higher in the heavens the company was re-formed and carried home their dead.

"That day I lay in a stupor, and at night I heard the low yawning whine of a tiger as he passed along the edge of the nullah, his head down and his tail switching with impatience for blood, before I managed to rouse myself to action. Then I crawled away slowly and painfully, dreading capture at every step, until I reached the spot where I had hidden my rifle and cartridges. Having possessed myself of these I made my way to the spot which I had determined on beforehand for my hiding-place, until men should deem me dead and the search for me should cease.

"A man who wilfully murders his officer in an English regiment, even in India, must find some shelter more secure than the jungle, darker than the depth of a nullah, in which to hide himself from the long arm of vengeance. I thought I knew of such a hiding-place, and in the darkness of night screwed up my nerves to seek it.

"I told you that the subaltern B. had ordered a machân to be made in the hope of getting a shot at the man-eating tiger which hung about our station Well, this man-eater had quite a history in the neighborhood. Almost every family for miles round had lost a relative by the paw of this enormous brute, and partly from fear, partly from superstitious reverence, the beast still survived and made the forest paths unsafe even in broad daylight. Of course he would

have died long ago under the rifles of our officers, but for one thing. He had chosen a lair out of which elephants could not beat him, into which the natives dared not penetrate, so that, unless caught in the very act of murder outside his sanctuary, he seemed likely to die of old age.

"About a mile down the nullah the streams, which roared through it in the rainy season, seemed to have spread out on a kind of oasis in the desert and then sunk out of sight, leaving in their place a dense island of high reeds, whose feathered heads rose from nine to twelve feet above the ground, and were so dense as to be almost impervious to a man on foot. All round the island of reeds the ground was a treacherous bog, so deep that a party who in years gone by attempted to drive the jungle saw one of their elephants entirely swallowed up in its treacherous depths. Natives would not attempt to cross it. Undoubtedly there were places across which a man might pass to the reeds beyond, but no man knew of them, and the place had come to be regarded as impregnable. Only one living thing had the secrets of that bog and the reedy labyrinths beyond in his keeping, and that thing was the man-eater. My one chance for life was to rob him of his secrets and share his sanctuary.

"I think that night the bushes were alive; there were voices in every one of them; strange shapes stood on the edge of every patch of moonlight, and I heard the tiger's tread in every falling leaf. But I kept my teeth set, and at last I lay among the bushes watching the spot where two days before I had noticed the water oozing into the fresh footprints of the cunning devil I was waiting for.

"I cannot describe to you my sensations during

that fearful night. When you are hunting a beast, however dangerous, the excitement keeps you up; but to lie all night by a man-eater's lair, whose cunning has ripened through three years of successful murder — to lie there, not certain from moment to moment whether the beast is in the bushes just behind you, slowly switching his tail backwards and forwards preparatory to the fatal spring, after which, as far as you are concerned, there will be nothing but a stunning blow, one great crunching bite upon the throat, and death! — that is another thing.

"There was just enough breeze to move the tree-tops that night, and whenever they were still I could hear my heart beat so loudly that I feared lest the noise of it should betray me to my foe. Early in the evening I heard the whistling flights of duck go by in the moonlight, close to me but invisible. Later on I heard in a djheel some quarter of a mile away the splashing and wallowing of a herd of buffalo; away on the foothills I heard the barking of the little kakur deer disturbed by some beast of prey; and once, far off, I heard that blood-curdling sound which tells man and beast that the striped fiend of the forest is seeking his prey in the night season.

"In spite of it all towards morning I dozed. Worn out with watching and the terrible exertions of the day, my head dropped forward and I slept. In my dreams I was back in the comfortable quarters of the —8th. A long heavy sigh close by me recalled me to consciousness. My blood stopped in my veins. I felt I must scream aloud, but, luckily for me, my tongue too was frozen. The bush behind which I lay was on the edge of the swampy belt which encircled the reeds; beyond was a space a few yards wide of

bare ground, and beyond that the thick jungle which surrounded the native villages. In the full glare of the moonlight, just on the edge of the shadow, stood the very incarnation of cruelty, its ears laid back level with its great round head, its vile eyes glittering with murderous hate, its lean limbs patched with mangy spots from the unholy food on which it had fed, and the tiger's whole attention apparently fixed on me. The man-eater was coming home, and I lay between him and it. It seemed a lifetime before anything fresh happened, but at last the great cat turned to the shadow again for a moment, and then slowly began to cross the space to where I lay, dragging something with it. The tiger must have had some suspicion even then that all was not right, though as yet I was not discovered, but after taking a couple of long silent paces he dropped his burden and crouched, while his eyes seemed to fairly blaze with rage. He had found me in his path and meant fighting, and I knew it, but even in that supreme moment I could not help noticing the ghastly way in which the head of the thing the tiger dropped rolled over on the ground. An hour ago that was a man.

"Whilst still safe in the shadow of my bush I was impotent with fear; shadows or a passing jackal set my pulses in a flutter. Now, face to face with death, my English blood was up and my nerves steady. My rifle might miss fire; in the moonlight I might well miss a vital spot; or at that short distance even a shattered heart might not stop the great brute's fatal spring. Luckily sportsmen don't calculate these chances, and I did not. As I pressed the trigger a hideous roar drowned my rifle's sharp crack, and the heavy smoke clinging to the ground hid everything

from my eyes. When it cleared there lay the tiger, as I had seen him last, eyes still glaring at me, and every straining muscle as full of rage and hate as before, but apparently chained to the spot. For a moment I did not understand, and then it flashed across me. At that short distance my rifle had carried high. I had missed his head but broken his spine; so that there lay my enemy, within half a dozen yards of me, from the loins to the head as full of life and devilry as ever, but as to the rest of him as dead as the dead man by his side.

"I don't know what was the matter with my nerves that night. It may have been that the hardships of the last twenty-four hours had unhinged me, or that that terrible white moonlight was getting into my brain and driving me mad, but for the life of me I could not kill the huge brute which lay helpless at my feet tearing up the earth with its terrible sharp claws. Its eyes fascinated me. They were Barlow's eyes asking blood for blood. They were the Archfiend's eyes claiming his own. What right had I to slay even this red-handed murderer? was not I too red-handed?

"For a moment I fancy I must have lost consciousness, but at last I staggered to my feet and slew the fierce, brave brute, who, as I fired my third blundering shot into him, still bared his impotent claws and kept his hungry eyes unflinchingly on mine. Then in the breaking morning I stood alone with the dead. The cold chill of coming dawn was in the air and my teeth chattered as I stood. The silver moonlight with its mistiness and romance had waned, and the cold matter-of-fact gray of the morning was peering down upon me and my misery. But I had no time to waste, and I worked as men work for life. The tiger

I rolled to where a little eminence hung over the softest part of the quagmire, and by herculean efforts, aided by a rough lever made on the spot from a bowlder and a young tree, as well as by the natural slope of the ground, contrived to set the carcass rolling over the steep incline. With a dull thud it fell on the yielding bog, was swallowed up, and left no trace. Then I returned to the native, already stiff and cold. He, poor fellow, had been a village postman, and had doubtless been killed by the tiger when on his rounds. His body was terribly mauled, and his face absolutely unrecognizable. From that alone you could not even tell whether he was a native or a European. He must have stood face to face with his foe when he was struck down. For a moment I thought of burying him with his murderer! then an idea struck me. Hurriedly taking off my own clothes I dressed his dead body in them, making shift myself with such scanty garments as he wore; then I dragged him back along the path by which the tiger had come last night, and there left him. After this, obliterating my own footsteps as well as I could, I crossed by the tiger's track over the quaking green morass into the tall jungle of feathery reeds, following what appeared to be a beaten path, the path no doubt along which the man-eater had passed many and many a time in the last two years.

"The trail led into the very heart of the jungle, and I felt that already I was comparatively safe from men's pursuit. Presently the path debouched into a little opening in the reeds, in which a great stone lay, and round it, strewn broadcast over the well-trodden grass, lay the whitening bones of men and beasts, but chiefly men, with here and there some poor

woman's armlet, or a rag of some wretched creature's clothes. This was the very home of the man-eater; under this stone he lay and sheltered from the sun, and here for one long week I lay and listened, slinking out sometimes at night, feeding on berries and roots and a few fish caught in the djheel. One night I heard firing, and shuddered, for I knew that the sound which reached me was our fellows' adieu to the murdered comrade. On the eighth night I crept out and revisited the scene of the tiger's death, and thence went to the spot where I had left the native in my clothes. His body had gone and all round men had tramped down the grass. Surely, surely, I had succeeded. My comrades had found the body in my clothes, killed by the man-eater, and murderer though I was, they had buried me. So I was dead and was free. That night I began my travels, and journeying at first only by night, in five or six weeks' time I reached these hills.

"The natives looked on me as a deserter and treated me kindly. With them for a while I lived, killing them game in return for their services to me, and then finding it easier to trap game than to shoot it I commenced my present career, which has grown in the last fourteen years until instead of taking only sufficient game for the pot I employ some twoscore natives to help me procure skins and natural-history specimens for the museums at home. It was slow work at first, but the natives were kindly and helpful. My traps were only such as I could make from the material the jungle provided me with, and the little luck with the musk deer soon provided me with money enough to start my simple trade. I have made a little money, and might go home and taste again

the freshness of an English summer morning if only I was as innocent in act as (God help me) I was that day in intent. How could my old skill have failed me? My God, why was I a murderer against my will?"

The last red spark was dying from the embers, and the glow of a new day just coming into the sky, when the white shekarry's grizzled head fell upon his hands when he finished his narrative.

Utterly broken-hearted, he had told me his pitiful story, I verily believe, as a criminal confesses sometimes at a police court, simply in order that he might be lightened of his intolerable load, even though he should lay down his life with the burden.

As he finished speaking, incidents in my own youth occurred to me, and things once incomprehensible became clear.

"Is that the rifle you shot the man-eater with?" I asked him, stretching out my hand for it as I spoke.

"Yes, that's it," he answered, and carefully blowing the dust of the wood fire from its barrels, he handed the well-made useful little weapon across the embers.

As I raised it to my shoulder to try its balance, its touch was as the touch of an old friend. My hand clung to it and caressed it, and the but seemed to fit into my shoulder as a joint into its socket. I hardly needed to look at the little silver shield charged with some quaint beast, devised in a herald's brain, to know that once that rifle had belonged to me. Putting it down I turned to Brown.

"That is a strange story, my friend, and few would believe it. Oddly enough, I know it is true, though I wonder you dared to tell it to me, an English officer, even here."

"Dared! Where is the daring, sir? We are alone, you and I, and equally armed. But enough of that. If you order me to do so, I will follow you to the nearest station as your prisoner," replied Brown.

"Well, you shall follow me if you choose by and by, but listen first to a story from me.

"Fourteen years ago it was my duty to take a firing party of the —8th to the range. The men shot infamously. Something had been going wrong with the regiment lately, and half the men were hardly sober enough to appear on parade, although no one was sufficiently drunk to make an example of him. When the first course had been shot off I came out of the buts, and a sergeant from the firing point walked up the range to help me to check the score. At that moment two rifles were fired almost simultaneously, and poor Barlow fell over, dead" —

"Barlow! Great Heavens! then your name is Baldwin, and you saw the whole thing happen? *Two* shots! Who else fired?" broke from the white lips of my *vis-à-vis*.

"As Barlow fell," I continued, "my soldier servant, who was among the men at the firing point, and who was one of the two men who fired, turned and ran like a mad thing for the nullah. His action could be construed only in one way, and I did my duty when I yelled to the men to stop him, alive or dead. The men were paralyzed with horror or in league with the murderer, and for a while held back; and when at last they fired, men who would have killed a black buck at twice the distance missed Brown by a yard or more. So he escaped, hurling himself wildly into the nullah. The nullah was deep and stony, and I had very little doubt but that the poor devil had saved

the powder of the regiment, and was lying dead at the foot of the steep wall of cliff from which he had thrown himself. To men less desperate than Brown the descent was well-nigh impossible, but when we had got down the man had gone and left no trace. The Indian sun had now risen, and, perplexed and disgusted, we returned to the range. Then the circumstance of the double shot recurred to me. Who fired the second shot, and why? why, too, had he not fled as Brown did? Well, I could answer one question myself. I saw Fry's rifle smoking in his hand immediately after the double discharge, and until I saw Brown run was convinced that the deed was his."

"Fry! Fry fired the second shot. Thank God, I understand," muttered my auditor in tones which seemed unnaturally intense.

"I suppose Brown's flight by drawing all our suspicion from him stopped all further inquiry, and besides, something had set the regiment by the ears and brought some of the men to the verge of mutiny, so that all our energies were on the strain to bring things back again into their normal condition.

"Fry's account of the matter was that he had heard Brown threaten to take Barlow's life, but had treated the threat as the vaporings of an ill-tempered man in his cups, but that when on the range he saw the unhappy fellow rush to his rifle and cover the sergeant with it he was convinced of Brown's intent, and being too far off to save Barlow otherwise he had fired straight at Brown. He surmised that in the excitement of the moment, and from a desire to wound and not to shoot the would-be murderer right through the body, he had made a clean miss.

"The story went down with those of us who knew nothing of the earlier stages of the trouble, but there were murmurings amongst the men, which as far as Fry was concerned were not even stilled by the finding of Brown's body on the third day in one of the woodland paths round the cantonment, mauled out of all resemblance to a man by that cursed man-eater who so long infested our camp at L——.

"For days we watched for the brute. I even tried, a week or so later, to beat the reed bed where he had his haunt, but we only lost a poor devil of a native in the attempt, and, oddly enough, never saw or heard of the man-eater again.

"Poor Brown appeared to have been his last victim, and we were thankful to the brute at least for one act in his life, to wit, that he had relieved us of the vile office of executioner.

"And so the story was forgotten. Brown and Barlow were dead, the man-eater gone, and Fry found his way to another station. Things settled down into the old comfortable groove again, and no one was more willing that every incident of the story should be buried in oblivion than myself, who, spite of all my brother officers could say, was never able to bring myself to believe that my favorite servant would shoot a man from behind." Here a choking sob from Brown almost put an end to my story.

"There was another thing besides the man Brown's character which raised doubts in my mind. At the very next occasion on which I was on the range I noticed a bullet hole in the dummy target which was new to me. True it was as clean a bull as if it had been put there by hand, at arm's-length, and being right in the middle of the black might just possibly

have escaped the notice of a casual observer, but in these things I was not a casual observer.

"On the contrary, no man in the regiment knew the range or the face of that dummy better than I did, for, apart from my position as a junior subaltern, whose duties often brought him on the range, I was one of the keenest rifle shots in the regiment, and expended many a round of government ammunition in private practice.

"This bullet hole in the dummy unexplained and unpaid for (for we fined any one who hit the dummy), coupled with the fact that no one spoke of having seen Fry's shot strike sand or tree or but, puzzled me a good deal.

"But Brown was dead, and there seemed an end of it.

"A few months later I was sent to command the men at a little hill sanatorium. Amongst the men under my command was Fry. It was dreary work up there, without a brother officer anywhere near, sick men all round me, and cholera so prevalent as to have reached us even in the sanatorium.

"Day after day men were dying, some of them of pure funk, and I don't know anything more depressing than the constant presence of death and the constant recurrence of the sights and sounds which accompany a soldier to his last resting place. These at last we had to put a stop to for the sake of the survivors, and even resort to punishing the least sign of 'nerves' amongst the men who remained, as if they had committed some grievous sin.

"At last Marshal, the doctor, broke down and lay dying, and then a man came to me to say Fry was down and with cholera, the doctor being too ill to attend.

"A glance at Fry was enough, and, at my wits' ends, I did the best I could for the fellow — seized a suit of flannels which lay handy, soaked them in boiling water, and wrapped them tightly round his stomach. This seemed to give him ease, and I thought that, bad-conditioned scoundrel as he was, he was grateful and would recover. I was wrong on both points.

"Towards evening they came to me over my solitary cheroot, and told me that the man Fry was sinking fast. I went to him of course at once, and found the news true.

"Drawn and terrible to look at, as only victims of that terrible disease can be, Fry yet pressed me for further confirmation of his fate. 'Was he dying?' 'Was I absolutely certain that he could not by any chance recover?' 'Ah, well, I thought so,' he whispered; 'then I'll tell you something to show you what a cursed set of fools you officers are. You remember Barlow's being shot by Brown, your favorite servant, and Brown disappearing after.' The fellow waited for an answer and groaned so feebly that I thought he would not have life to finish his speech. I nodded. 'Well,' he went on, 'I shot Barlow. Brown ought to have done it by rights, but hadn't the heart of a chicken. What he run away for beats me; but it's just as well he did, for after that shot no one would have believed as he did not shoot Barlow against my oath. Yes, I done it, and I'm glad I done it. I hated 'em both, and a pretty set of fools you all were,' and with a chuckle mingling with his death rattle this utterly hardened scoundrel died."

. . . . . .

As I finished my story the fire had burned out.

Brown sat as it were in a stupor, his head buried in his hands, and the first ray of the sun rose and touched the far-off ridge of snow peaks, with a fiery finger filling the gray heavens with rosy hues, and flooding the snow with color like a rising flush.

Crossing the ashes I held out my hand to Brown, laying the other on his shoulder. "Come," I said, "Joe, there's fair play for you. As your character is cleared a new day is beginning for you, my man; come back home with me, my own service is all but over. Finish the rest of your life with me about my old home."

I can't paint the man's face or words in any words of mine. I don't think he said many, but I know that when he accepted the berth of gamekeeper about my old place at home there was no happier man and no more devoted servant than the deserter, Joe Brown.

From the foot of the Nilgherries to the foot of the Cotswold Hills is a long step indeed, but my reader must take it if he would see the closing scene in this little history of a wandering life.

We left Brown by a dead camp-fire among the mighty trees of India; we meet him again just sallying from the wicket of his keeper's cottage at Fulford.

To a wanderer returning from the East the old "country" at first conveys an impression of smallness. The enclosed fields are so tiny, the hills so dwarfed and insignificant, the colors so soft and quiet, the scenery so unimpressive and slumbrous.

It is a country of ants after a country of giants, but a second glance recommends the country of ants in preference to the land of great things. If the

colors are quiet they at any rate are not harsh; if hill and tree and landscape generally are on a small scale, it is the small scale of the miniature where every line is wrought carefully to perfection. It is a miniature as compared to scene painting, and the one tires while the former satisfies. Of all the villages of England none have more of this beauty of the miniature than Fulford, with its irregular streets of gray stone houses, garlanded with masses of purple clematis, its old gray church gazing through windows (rich with the colors of Albert Dürer) upon the fairest dimpled trout stream in Great Britain.

Over the stream and below the church runs a bridge, and at its town end stands the mill, gray stone grown grayer with age, green and brown in patches, with moss fed by the spray from the mill-race, and dappled over with soft shadows of the million fluttering leaves of those old trees gathered round its walls.

The race comes foaming down from the park above, where the broad still waters go dreaming past smooth-shaven lawns, whose greenery they mirror until they suddenly wake to life, and tumble in white foam into the pool below.

Above the pool is the miller's little garden, and here, in these soft July evenings, the old man blows away the dust of his calling and reads his paper, while pretty Harriet, his daughter, pretends to do needlework by his side.

I am bound to admit that when the undergraduates from Oxford get leave to fish this pool very little of that needlework gets done; but then angling is an art congenial to women, and no wonder Harriet loves to watch it.

This evening, the workmanlike figure in waders is

no undergraduate, but Harriet seems pleased to see him for all that, and anxious that the pretty broad sailor-hat should be tilted over her eyes at exactly the most becoming angle.

"Good-evening, Miss Harriet. Any one done any good lately with the fish?" asks Brown.

"No; most of those who come here tell me they catch something, but I never see them do it," answered Harriet, opening the garden door to the keeper.

"Don't watch their fly close enough when you are about, perhaps, Harriet?"

"None of your nonsense, Mr. Brown, even if every one isn't as interested in fishing as you are. Nobody ever took your attention off your beastly old fish."

Now Harriet was getting angry just a little, for it was quite true that though he was glad enough to fish from the garden, Brown was not much of a talker when engaged on what he called business.

Harriet was going into the house, when Brown's voice stopped her.

"By Jove, what a whopper! Harriet, come here."

Compelled by curiosity and by that sense of obedience natural to women, Harriet turned and found the keeper with his eyes fixed, like those of a man who had seen a ghost, on the boiling little pool below.

"What is it, Mr. Brown?"

"Well, just the biggest fish near Fulford. Do you see him?"

"What, in the stream?"

"No; there in the shadow of the bank just outside the stream; not that fish by the weed, he is a bare pound, but below him, a foot or so below him."

Now an ordinary woman's eyes would probably have seen no fish in the pool at all, but Fulford girls have the eyes of a kingfisher to detect the finny tribes, be they basking or rising or sulking on the golden gravel. So Harriet saw the pounder spoken of with such contempt; she saw in the silver ripples and white foam two or three other good fish with their heads up stream, sucking down the drowning flies, or darting from time to time at smaller rivals who dared to invade their happy hunting grounds, but for a moment she saw no more.

At last, with a gasp, she caught Brown by the arm. "Oh, Mr. Brown, I see him; surely that can't be a trout?"

"Well, Harriet, it ain't no pike, you may bet on that; pike don't rise at flies, my girl, at least not often."

Just in the shadow of the bank, where the water ran swift but smooth, under overhanging trees, practised eyes could see a great black shadow softly rising and settling down again in the water. It was like the ghost of a fish, so still was the water, so quiet and phantom-like its motions. When the duns one after another were silently sucked down to death no ripple broke the water, or at any rate not half so big a ripple as the gay little fish of two ounces made on the ford below.

As they watched, something was whirled down on the edge of the broken water, and with a rush the big shadow turned and snatched his prey, showing a huge broadside to the watchers on the bank, and then settling quietly back into his lair.

"Four pounds, or I'm a nigger," gasped the keeper.

"Well, you *are* Brown, but niggers are mostly

black," retorted Harriet; "hadn't you better try to catch the fish? looking at him won't do it."

"Don't you be saucy, miss. Looks catch some fish bigger than him. No, don't go, we'll see if we can't get him between us. Your eyes and my rod, Harriet."

"How do you mean, Joe?"

Of course it was an accident, the excitement made her call him Joe.

"Well, this way. You sit there and watch, tell me when my fly covers him, and I'll go into the pool below and fish up to him."

"All right, only be quick."

Brown left the garden, and a minute later he was up to his waist almost in the strong water, his pliant rod playing backwards and forwards, and the silken thread of his line trying hard to find a passage among the boughs of an overhanging ash. How certain it is that every big fish will shelter under some impossible bough, or if not that the wind will be in your teeth. However, an angler must find a way at last, and before long Harriet's upheld hand told Brown (the gurgling water drowned her voice) that his fly was floating truly over the lair of the big fish.

It was a pretty picture, and would have been so even without its framework of shadowy trees and cool waters, that thoroughly English girl's face, the fair hair blown back, lips parted, blue eyes straining at the water, the light black dress held by the evening breeze tight against the comely figure, and I am bound to admit that I have my doubts as to whether, in spite of his enthusiasm, Brown was quite as attentive to his work as he should have been when the girl's voice rose above the waters, "You've got him. Wait till I bring the net."

Yes, there was no doubt about having got him. The little Ogden was bent double and the line was fairly hissing from the reel through the rough water, and in the excitement of the moment the keeper almost lost his balance and fell backwards in the flood.

For a good five minutes the fish fought and never showed himself, sure sign of a good fish. At last he began to give in, and inch by inch Brown led him to the shallows where Harriet waited net in hand. Out of the deep water he came *tail* first, only three-quarter pound, and foul-hooked, hence the fight he had shown. Those were no doubt remarks made in some Asiatic tongue which escaped from Brown's lips as he unhooked his fish, remarks on the advantages of ladies' society elicited by the peals of laughter with which Harriet mocked at his sorrow.

"Confound it, Harriet, go and see if the big one is still there."

"Certainly not, if you ask me like that," retorted the young lady with a toss of her head.

"Well, then, please, Harriet, go and look." And she went.

Whiss, whiss, went the line, and the fly was changed once or twice; but though the fish continued to rise, and artificial black gnat, blue dun, and Ogden's fancy danced over him more natural than life, the fish would not look at them.

At last Brown gave it up, and putting on a huge "park alder" as they call them there, threw it into the rough water of the fall at hazard to catch another pounder to make a brace for the dinner at the hall next day.

Suddenly the waters were moved, the great black

shadow dashed among the white water, the girl cried out, the rod bent double, the line spun out, and the whole battle began again.

Thank Heaven it is an alder, thought Brown, and mounted on mayfly gut! Backwards and forwards across the race went the fish, the keeper afraid to put much strain on him yet, and the pool seeming too small for the vagaries of such a leviathan, and then bang! out he came in one glorious leap, his great side flashing in the last rays of the evening sun upon the water and missing the frail line by a hair's-breadth as he fell back into his native element. For a moment or two the big fish bored head down among the weeds, Brown following him reckless of bowlder and deep water until his waders were full, and he began to wonder if even Ogden's rods and Ogden's gut could stand the strain much longer. Then the fish turned and came slowly and gently as a half-beaten fish will right towards his captor, who, winding in line as fast as his hand could work, backed towards the shallow by the bridge where weary oxen and fly-galled horses wade into the pool for a long delicious drink and bathe. Here, her cheek glowing with excitement, stood Harriet, net in hand, and on the bridge were half a dozen excited village children.

The bridge itself stands on low arches some two feet six or less above the stream; it is a low bridge, but broad, and beyond it (after a little clear water) is a huge bank of weeds. Past one arch the fish allowed himself to be towed, and every one saw his giant size, and already he seemed almost upon the scales, the heaviest fish the Colne had ever yielded to an angler's wiles. But something stirred him to fresh effort at the last moment; either his firm side struck too

rudely on a pebble, or a ray of sunlight shot beneath the arch woke in him one more hope of freedom. Whatever it was, he turned, shot straight between the fisherman's legs and down the dark archway for the weeds below. For a moment the thin line ground against the masonry, the next getting right down in the water, his rod's but between his legs. Brown managed to let the line run out freely, hoping against hope that his fish, if humored, would yet come back to him. If not, with that bridge between them, there was nothing to be done but to sit there patiently until something gave, and then — go home. Suddenly a jar upon the line vibrated along its whole length, and was communicated along it to the very heart of the fisherman, followed by that limp "all-gone" feeling which those only know who have seen the rod suddenly straighten and the slack line come back, whilst they know that a good fish has gone down the stream with a tooth-ache who should have gone home in their creel. But at the same moment a sweet young voice sung out from the shadows beyond the bridge, "Joe, I've got him. Come on! Quick!" The rod was left to itself, the water-logged waders splashed through the ford and hopped over the wall as easily as if they had been a pair of running shoes, and there on the other side stood Harriet, up to her knees in the water near the weeds, her back bent, and both hands holding on to the rings of the net in which the great fish still floundered, luckily head first.

"Oh, Joe, do be quick!" she cried, almost in tears, "or I'm sure he'll get away yet;" and before her sentence was well finished Joe had the net and the fish in hand, carried them tenderly ashore, knocked

the fish's head against the toe of his great boot, and then — remembered Harriet. Ungallant I admit, but true to nature I maintain. To get a young lady out of a brook it is necessary to put your arm round her waist. This Joe did. If you put your arm round her waist, it brings your head and hers very close together, and the temptation is to kiss her. This, too, Joe did.

"You little brick!" he murmured, "that is the best fish in the Colne, and the prettiest girl in Fulford landed him."

It was a rash act, that kiss, no doubt, and no doubt Harriet resented it, for the village children saw it, though they seemed to think it no harm; the two Misses Smith saw it, veteran proprietresses of a ladies' seminary, and reported it next day to the rector; and the burly curate, in his blue tricycling flannels, got a glimpse of it, and told his rector that, if he had not been a parson, he would almost have liked to change places with Brown.

Harriet's dress was, she said, wringing wet, but a wet dress in June matters little; so as Joe had lost his pipe in the stream, and must needs have a companion to see him home, she followed him across the park down the long avenues, growing full of shadows now that the sunlight's last gleam was falling on cornfield and river.

What he said or she answered there I know not; a drowsy wood-pigeon in the lime-trees may have heard, but he has not repeated it. All I know is that a couple of months later the bells of the village church rang for a wedding, and when the bronzed soldier (now keeper to Major B——) led Harriet home to the porch beneath the purple clematis, even the

Misses Smith admitted that if he "must go kissing girls about the village, he could not do better than marry them."

Up at the Hall that night another weather-worn veteran, smoking his after-dinner cheroot, looked back along the vista of his memories, and thanked Heaven that a love of English fair play had been the means of saving a good soldier from a shameful crime, and had landed him instead in a cosey billet, in the keeper's lodge of Fulford, with Fulford's prettiest lass for his wife.